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## A Tribute to Mordechai Vanunu by Daniel Ellsberg

Read at the Berkeley Unitarian Church  
September 28, 2002

Dear friends of Mordechai Vanunu,

I have never, ever, written out a speech beforehand, or afterwards. And I haven't done so today. But I have lost my voice. I could probably speak some minutes now, but at the cost of losing it for weeks; and in two weeks I begin a speaking tour, which I hope to use to speak out against this coming war. Someone suggested I cancel this appearance, but that's impossible: I can't give up the opportunity to pay tribute from my heart in my own words to Mordechai Vanunu, at this precise time, when his is exactly the inspiration the world needs. This dark time: weeks before an election turning in a unique degree on whether our country should be for the first time in this century an open aggressor nation; days before our representatives in Congress will vote on that question-the majority, almost surely, shamefully, in support of it-weeks or months before our country or Vanunu's may launch the first nuclear massacre since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So I've written hastily a few notes to be read for me by my friend Joanna Macy.

Mordechai Vanunu is the preeminent hero of the nuclear era. He is the one who consciously risked all he had in life to warn his own country and the world of an existing, ongoing addition to the nuclear dangers of the era. And he is the one who has actually paid that price, a burden in many ways worse than death, for his heroic and prophetic act, for doing exactly what he should have done and what others should be doing. He is a prophet who deserves honor in all the world. The secret he revealed was that his country-like our own, and Russia, and several other nuclear weapons states-had a nuclear program and stockpile that went far beyond any supposed needs of nuclear deterrence. Its scale and nature was clearly designed for threatening and if necessary launching first-use of nuclear weapons against conventional forces-Israeli attacks comprising hundreds of tactical nuclear weapons. In this, Israel was imitating and endorsing the legitimacy of US and NATO first-use threats, which in turn required and rationalized a nuclear-arms buildup that mocked the pretensions and supposed commitments the US and the



Soviet Union signed in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It endorsed the US concept of an indefinitely structured two-tier division of the world into Nuclear States and Non-Nuclear-Weapons States, in which Israel, with US acquiescence, would be in the first category, the first in the Middle East.

First but not last. The US-Israeli policy, joined by the Soviet Union, Britain, and France (China has at least announced a no-first-use policy), made virtually certain that India, and shortly Pakistan, would choose to join that first tier, and that other states in the region-not only Iraq-would seek and eventually acquire these weapons. That prospect-dooming any prospect of non-proliferation, let alone abolition-made the Israeli policy of the utmost danger to Israel itself in the longer run. No other national policy so deserved searching and sober national debate and concern; which could not occur under the Israeli government's policy of censorship, secrecy, and misleading and false denial. Nor has that debate yet occurred; in this way, Vanunu's hopes were not fulfilled. In the short run, his efforts have failed. But that doesn't make his effort less heroic or appropriate. And I know from my own experience, that initial indications of ineffectiveness and failure, even over a period of years, can be misleading and premature. There is simply no way to know what the hidden, indirect-in his case global-ongoing consequences of such an act of truth-telling may be, nor to put a limit on the possible eventual benefits of it.

We are at this moment where the worst possible consequences of the US and Israeli policies may shortly be realized. Either or both Israeli and US tactical nuclear weapons could very plausibly be launched against Iraq within months, if the US invasion being prepared leads Saddam Hussein to launch short-range missiles armed with chemical warheads against Israel or against US troops. Both countries have warned that such an act-which is highly likely to follow, or even shortly precede, an American ground assault-will lead to the "annihilation" of Iraq, the "destruction" of its society. These are clearly nuclear threats of the use of nuclear weapons: which President Bush has very accurately described to the UN as "weapons of mass murder." I do not believe, under this Administration or that of Israel, that these threats of mass murders are bluffs, or that they are meant solely for purposes of deterrence.

Saddam Hussein probably also possesses weapons of mass murder: nerve gas warheads and biological weapons. I believe that the chance he would use these, or turn them over to others, when he is not under direct ground attack, is close to zero. (His ability to be deterred and to refrain from using them even when under heavy air attack, not accompanied by invasion of Iraq, has already been uniquely tested, eleven years ago). Thus, I believe that Saddam Hussein's Iraq, not under heavy attack, constitutes no threat at all to the national security of the US, or even-while US forces are in the region-to its neighbors. Americans who believe otherwise have been totally misled by the deceptive assertions of the Administration. But under the attack we are preparing, I believe



the danger is very real that he does possess and will use enough such weapons to trigger a US or Israeli nuclear response: the first precedent for nuclear first-use since Nagasaki

Thus, we are at this moment in the most dangerous nuclear crisis since the Cuban Missile Crisis. The very existence of the hundreds of Israeli weapons of which Mordechai Vanunu warned is not to this day not officially admitted by Israel to the world. Still less is the Israeli stockpile opened for inspection and monitoring, any more than those of any of the other declared or undeclared nuclear weapons states, including, very dangerously, those of Pakistan and India. Yet in dangerous mockery of this shadowy status, I am sure that Israeli plans for the possible targeting of their weapons are underway as we speak, in preparation for a highly likely "contingency" just weeks or months away.

To try to avert that terrible slaughter and even more terrible precedent was surely worth Mordechai Vanunu's living entombment the last sixteen years. It would be worth the life of anyone who shared his view—as I do—both of the physical and the moral stakes. We have recently been reminded, on September 11, of the tribute by President Lincoln to those who "gave the last full measure of devotion." Mordechai Vanunu, now out of the decade-long torture of solitary confinement but still in prison, is our shining example of that sacrifice. May he still, with our help, emerge from that to be our nuclear-age Nelson Mandela.

But as Lincoln went on to say: "It is for us the living"—us the free, us who still have, for some period, the privileges and powers and opportunities of a democracy, to draw strength from his example. Mordechai's action and life speaks to us in the words of Henry David Thoreau, after his night in jail protesting an earlier American war of aggression against Mexico. As if he were addressing this very night those who will be casting votes, or perhaps doing more than that, in the House and Senate next week and at the polls next month, Thoreau wrote, in his essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* in 1848: "Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless when it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight."

### **Excerpts from Q&A**

. . . . In his declaration of foreign policy plans, Bush has already rejected the principles for which I entered the Marines in 1954 during the Korean Emergency in the face of what I saw as North Korean aggression, the principle we said we were fighting for in World War II, the principle which mobilized a broad coalition against Saddam Hussein in 1990 and 1991 because he had committed clear-cut aggression—we are now about to violate that clearly and blatantly, and thus, for a very long time, abrogate that principle, the simple one single thing that so many



countries can agree on, the principle that aggression against foreign nations is wrong. Even Arab nations and Saddam's trading partners joined us in opposing him when he violated it. That's where we are when I say this is a dark time. . . .

*Question: Can you talk about how much of Bush's nuclear war-fighting strategy is continuity and how much of it represents a really radical break with Carter, Reagan, Bush One, and Clinton.*

Let me say briefly actually what I think is likely to happen. I'll just talk about what's going on right now, rather than about all the intentions going back years, or two years, or one year. First, whatever the UN does, and whatever Congress does, unfortunately it is very likely there will be a US invasion of Iraq coming. I've already said I think the odds are that it will not be openly against the will of the UN, and it's almost certain that it will not be against the majority sentiment of Congress. Shame on the UN, shame on the permanent members of the Security Council, shame on the US Congress, except for the thirty or forty members of the House led by Barbara Lee and Dennis Kucinich, and except for the twenty or so senators. So the war is coming, probably, whatever we do. Second, I think it's highly likely that Saddam will prove to have some chemical weapons, and he might possibly send some of those out against us, either while our troops are deploying or as they invade, or he might possibly send some out against Israel. Third, if that happens, and this is not esoteric knowledge, it's not even speculation—I believe the statements of the U.S. and Israel are not bluffs—I believe they will use nuclear weapons. I don't say against a relatively ineffective use of biological or chemical weapons that kill a few soldiers, but with anything more significant than that I think we will see nuclear explosions.

Now the question you are implying is “Can't they see that?” What do they think about that? By “they” I mean Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz (I don't know what Bush sees or doesn't see, or thinks, or whether he can even read or not [laughter]). Unfortunately these are the ones for whom war is nothing but an abstraction, the so-called chicken hawks. They predominate over all the generals, like Powell, Schwarzkopf, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for whom, whether they like it or don't like it, war is not an abstraction. The generals know it's a very serious matter that needs a justification that doesn't exist now. So these hawks are in command. What then can be their attitude about the coming use of nuclear weapons? Will they say they didn't imagine it? First of all, in my speech I said something that I have never said publicly before, and it's very simple. I am certain they are making plans right now in Washington and in the Middle East and in Israel for the possible use of their nuclear weapons a few weeks from now. And these are not contingency plans about some obscure possible contingency; they are the plans for the likely consequence of the plans they are in the process of implementing right now.

So that's where we are. This is the world that Vanunu gave his life, his



living life for, in exchange for a living hell, and it was right for him to do that, right for him to die if he had had to die. He was willing to die for a much better cause than the one for which hundreds to thousands of Americans will die shortly, and for which hundreds of thousands to millions of Iraqis will die. Now how could these planners be accepting this? My own guess is that these particular hawks, Rumsfeld, their mentor Perle, even someone out of office like Kissinger though in a way he's not on the same side in this particular case—specifically Rumsfeld, Cheney, Perle, Wolfowitz—my guess is, these particular ones, want to see this probable consequence.

How could they? Because they have openly proposed to base US security policy for the indefinite future on a readiness to launch first-use nuclear weapons, not on the scale of war against the Soviet Union, but against much smaller countries, in the usual tradition of the imperial wars, the colonial wars, of past centuries, of the present century. They want that threat to be credible and they want it to be legitimate. This just speculation, but a very informed—not currently informed, but informed by a lifetime of work on this—speculation. I think I know how these people's minds work, although I haven't met any of them. I didn't meet them in Vietnam, that's for sure. Cheney spent the Vietnam years—he was draft age—in a secure location in Arizona. As did even Rumsfeld, who was a Navy flier but didn't manage to use his flying experience in Vietnam. I think they look forward to first and actual use under circumstances that will be maximally legitimating—from the point of view of Americans—circumstances like Hiroshima, under which these weapons will “protect” US soldiers' lives.

What I foresee when this resolution is passed next week or the week after is that Bush will not go to war on the basis of that resolution except in a very general way. He will go to war in my guess in six to five, seven to five, weeks, though that's not a certainty. It will be before the election. It will be on the basis of sudden immediate information that American lives are at stake because Saddam is loading chemical weapons onto his missiles, his Silkworm missiles from China, that he has threatened American ships, that he is preparing weapons of mass destruction against American troops should they invade in the course of aggression or in the course of a Congressional resolution or UN resolution, and so forth. So even without the resolution, it would be Bush's response, his need, to go right away.

I think, in other words, that he will launch what he will call a literally preemptive war in the face of a threat to our soldiers, and I am sorry to say that the American people will support that use, most of them will, not the people here, along with many thousands, maybe even millions of us elsewhere in this large country. But he majority will support it. If weapons of mass destruction are used against Israel, if Israel is hit by gas weapons, well, a fair number of people in the world will say, “Jews hit by gas again, what can you expect? They've got to reply. They've got to commit mass murder themselves. They've got to drop an Auschwitz on



their enemy if it happens to them again. That's human and understandable." And it is human and understandable, and that's why the human species faces extinction right now. That's where we are.

So the reason I gave up my voice this afternoon [Ellsberg was recovering from Laryngitis at the time and barely had any voice left] is that I wanted to ask Barbara Lee to do two things. The first is that after the resolution is passed, the minority in Congress must hold hearings. They can't do it in the House formally, but they can do it as a minority, they can hold unofficial hearings. The Senate could hold official hearings of some subcommittee or another. They must call critics of the war and skeptics, like Scott Ritter, or, as I suggested to her, Nelson Mandela or Archbishop Tutu, get them in there, and put it on the record how clearly aggressive and dangerous this is. It gives aggression a bad name in the following sense. Aggression is being sold to us. Preventative war is being sold to us. There was a reason for the centuries-old proscription against this, and we are about to see that reason, the dangers of it, the human cost of it. That's one reason I gave up my voice this afternoon.

The other is to demand that the leaders of Congress demand from the President what they did not demand or get in 1964 when we were faced with false assertions by Robert McNamara, my boss, by Dean Rusk, and by the President, of intelligence that proved the need to respond immediately with sixty-five sorties. Don't let a war start again, at least don't let the Administration get away with starting a war, on the basis of false evidence that our troops are in danger. The only way to protect those troops from chemical weapons, the only way, and I want to protect our troops, is to keep them from committing aggression against Iraq.

*Question: What can the current antiwar movement learn from the movement against the Vietnam war?*

Very good question. What lessons should we learn from the movement to stop the Vietnam war, which like Vanunu and like the Pentagon Papers, failed and failed and failed, until it succeeded and the war eventually was brought to an end. Did we do that as fast as it conceivably could have been done? Did we do everything right? Couldn't it be improved? It had to take ten years? Etc., etc. It's going to be pretty hard to stop this war now, in the next ten days or ten weeks or whatever it is, and yet it's never over till it's over. So what can we do to prevent it or if not prevent it—and we probably won't—to prevent the war after that, which might be only months, or years, or a few years, away, and the war after that, and the war after that?

Because that's what this team has in mind, I have concluded. That's my best understanding, that they're not content just to have the oil of Iraq, the same way that Iraq tried ten years ago to get the oil of Kuwait. They want the oil of Kuwait, and they want the oil of Saudi Arabia under better control than that under the current uppity government. The possibility of America occupying the eastern oil fields of Saudi Arabia, I



think, is in the cards. We're not going to leave it to proxies. This is important. This isn't just land, this is oil. Iran lies ahead. Covert action probably will be based from our bases in Iraq and elsewhere. All of which is going to enrage the Muslim world, and the Arab world.

So a terrible prospect lies ahead. What I am saying here though is that it's not all over ten days from now when this war starts. We've got a long struggle ahead of us to avoid the worst that lies ahead. So how are we to do this? Congress is looking just awful now. A Democrat, which I am to a certain extent, has to feel shame. They really are acting as though their own personal prospects of re-election outweigh their absolute ability to stop this war in the Senate by saying what Hatfield and McGovern and Church said thirty years ago: no money for action in defiance of the UN, or for aggression. If they could do that, it would block the war. They are refusing even to make a gesture towards doing that.

Do we give up on Congress? No, we can't give up on it. It's our best hope. So I think that pressure on Congress is necessary. Now how do you bring that pressure on it? Well, I was listening to the demonstrations, and I agree of course with the demonstrations, but I do think, looking back, that demonstrations with slogans and flags and rhetoric, that say to the local Congressmen, these are non-voters, they are certainly not my voters, don't really have much effect, and they sure don't get reported much, so they have kind of a minimal effect. The way to have an effect, I think—and I wasn't clear on this at the time and didn't do what I could have done at the time—is not just by demonstrations, but also by letter writing, by campaigning for people like Barbara Lee and against others that are not like Barbara Lee.

The way to bring pressure is to make people in Congress increasingly and intimately aware of the intentions of the Constitution. They may not see the light, but they will feel the heat. Let them know that they will lose their jobs if they go along with the president when he is acting like an aggressor. It's just unfortunately—right now let's be realistic—it's not enough to flatter our nation here by saying we're not a rogue nation, it's only our government. It's very nice if Iraq thinks that, but if they don't, I don't blame them because it's kind of silly. Our people are not paying much attention to this problem. They are not informing themselves. They are not seeing behind what the President is saying, and frankly, that ain't too hard to do. So they don't look too good either at the moment.

On the other hand, people like us here are not limited to the people in this room. Say there's one percent of the people who have the same urgency as the people here do. Well, that's more than two million people. Two million people can do a lot. The quote I said from Thoreau had a big effect on me when I read it in 1969. The quote is "Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight." So what we



can be doing is bringing every kind of pressure on our Congresspersons and supporting others to go beyond business as usual, what they have done up to now, to go beyond casting a strip of paper merely.

Senator Morse told me in 1971, when the Pentagon Papers came out and he was out of office, he said, "If you had given me what was in your safe at the time in '64, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution would never have gotten out of committee, and if it had, it would never have passed." Well, that was a heavy burden to put on me, right? But fair, perfectly fair.

So I mentioned it to Barbara Lee today. My point was, and it applies to all this, be creative, go beyond what you normally do to resist something. I thought Tom Paine was right. This is a time that tries men's and women's souls.

Okay, so you say to everybody in Congress, the ones who are already on our side, "Have you done everything you can?" Well, nobody that I know in the world, nobody except Mordechai Vanunu, not me, you, or anybody, has done everything they can. There's always more we can do, we who are not in a cell, in isolation. Even in a cell, in isolation, Mordechai has found ways to do more, to get statements out, to refuse to cooperate. There is always more. Mordechai's example pushes us on. It pushes me on, pushes everybody on. Barbara Lee's example has pushed other people on to join her as the single person who did the right thing. Now there are thirty or forty.

My editor sent me an email the other day saying, "You are ordered not to use your voice. A lot depends on it. You've been waiting to speak out on this subject for thirty years. Don't blow it. Don't speak." Okay, well, I couldn't avoid speaking for Barbara Lee, for Mordechai, to this group. She said to spend the two weeks in total silence but to write an op-ed, and my son Michael's idea, that I'm going to use for an op-ed, is: as we face another Tonkin Gulf Resolution, manipulated for this public by lies and deceptions like before, I call on Executive Branch officials who know that this war is disastrously reckless and illegal and who possess evidence that the President and the Vice President and the Secretary of Defense are lying to the public—and they are—I call on these Executive Branch officials to do what I wish I had done in 1964 before the first Tonkin Gulf Resolution: to tell the truth to Congress and the public, with documents.

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